

Number 6

June 1956

The following article on Christian work among prisoners is written by the Rev. G. Fraser Thompson who is engaged as chaplain in this work in England. He is General Secretary of the Royal London Discharged Prisoners' Aid Society. In order to understand and appreciate the way in which this article is written the following sentences from his letter sent along with this article are quoted.

"I am strongly of the opinion that anything that is too much 'highlighted' would do the work real harm. We have suffered far too much from that. What needs to be impressed is that it is patient and plodding work; difficult, but with its rewards. I do stress the importance of putting the matter very quietly. The public has been too often offered pieces of excitement that are not typical of prison life and work."

"TO PROCLAIM RELEASE TO THE CAPTIVE"

To minister to prisoners is at once a great privilege and a great responsibility, and offers both opportunity and difficulty. There is opportunity in the fact that the prisoners are held in prison, they cannot get away, and the appointed chaplains are presented with the duty of offering to them the Gospel of Salvation. There is difficulty inherent in the fact that the prisoner cannot get away, and from the fact that the chaplain is an official or an officially appointed person whose duty it is to preach the Gospel.

Prison also engenders a strange mixture of emotions in its inmates, for it holds them in an unnatural normality which is only partially touched by outside life and events. It gives opportunity for contemplation, but that may degenerate into brooding; its separation may create fear or bitterness. All these things need to be taken into account in order that a ministry to these men may be fully effective. But, whatever else is done, one thing must be paramount in the mind and in the attitude of the one who seeks to minister - and that is that those to whom he ministers are first of all, and last of all, men - men like himself and his fellows. Any suggestion of superiority, of talking down to them, of using the imprisonment as a means of evangelism from which they cannot escape, must inevitably compel failure. Crime is the expression of self-interest and involves the man who commits it to a personal isolation. Whatever he has done he has done because he has regarded himself as being the only person who needs to be considered. He has stolen to get gain for himself, without regard to the loss suffered by others. He has hurt to satisfy his own pride. He has soiled someone else to satisfy his personal lust. Discovery of the crime and conviction makes the isolation he has unconsciously built up obvious to him. He is in a prison, in a cell, behind walls and bars, alone and out of contact with the normal world. Still more importantly he is isolated by shame, by fear, by anxiety for the future, and in some cases this may turn to bitter resentment.

It is the object of prison administration today to break down that isolation and show the prisoner that there is a way back to normal life, so that he may be once more a member of and not an outcast from society. Whilst many things are being done today in the official words to establish in the prisoner "the will to lead a good and useful life and to fit him to do so", there can be nothing so effective as the Gospel of Christ, for it is the motive power of the goodness men otherwise vainly seek.

The object of prison is to reform the prisoner, to make him seek a better way of life. In days past it was felt that it was sufficient to make him ever conscious of his crime and the seriousness of its consequences. But if a thief is to be cured of his thieving, he must first come to a change of heart. He must see that he is too good for a life of crime and not too bad for honesty. These are things that are implicit in the Gospel, and because that is so the work of the evangelist is of supreme importance.

It is to be recalled again that there are emotional and environmental difficulties, and the Chaplain who is normally charged with the evangelising of the prisoner must bear this in mind. His work is intensely personal and even his collective work is coloured by his personal relations. His first duty is to establish a personal contact. It is his duty to see each prisoner as early as possible after his reception into prison. He goes to his cell and at once is faced with the difficulty of having to meet a stranger unprepared for his visit, and he himself is an uninvited visitor. He may be regarded with some measure of suspicion; it will be remembered that this is his job. He must break through these barriers. He does it not by preaching but first by a human approach, as man to man. It may well be that no opportunity presents itself on that first visit to speak of God and eternal things, nor even on a second or third visit, but inevitably the time comes,



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2025

and because he has won the other man's respect and regard, the opportunity comes most naturally, frequently at the man's own request.

There are some in prison who have had Christian associations in the outside world, some few who have fallen from the grace they once knew. In these cases there is already a foundation on which to build. It may be there is a bitterness of soul, and a fear too that they can never again share in the fellowship of the Church of God. The ministry of the chaplain enables him to dispose of this and show both the love of God and the love of the members of the Church. There are today men back in the fellowship of the Church because neither the Prison Chaplain nor the minister of the Church at home failed to show the spirit of Christ and His love. But for the most part prisoners have had little or not contact with the Church. The religious denomination which they have declared does not generally indicate the Church which they attended, but rather the Church from which they consistently stayed away. Much personal teaching is thus found imperative, and even so the time is short. Yet even if all cannot be explained, much is accomplished if a hope is stirred and a new desire born.

Prison is often a place of self-revelation. Its very isolation makes a man think and often this impels him to unburden himself. He will talk to the chaplain of his life, and even when he is trying to excuse himself he often reveals himself most clearly. In these conversations come the greatest opportunities for evangelism, for there are no hindrances and none to overhear. There are some who pretend, in order to gain sympathy or attention, but there are others, not a few, whose hearts yearn after the peace of God and do not yearn in vain.

The services of the Church which the prisoners attend are normally conducted by the chaplain and it is precisely because he is known of the prisoners, and knows them and their needs that he is the most effective of evangelists. To be present at a Prison service is a moving experience. The singing will cause considerable surprise for it is eager and hearty. The singing is obviously enjoyed for it becomes an opportunity of expression, but the words themselves can scarcely fail to leave some impression. A prison congregation is inspiring in that it calls forth from the preacher his best endeavour and gives an attentive hearing. The reality of that hearing is frequently shown by the questions asked of the chaplain afterwards. His message has been pondered and often a new vision created.

There can be few more heart-stirring experiences than the service of Holy Communion in prison. The privilege of Holy Communion is offered to those who by their profession and by their sincerity desire to attend. To see a group of prisoners meeting at the Table of the Lord, their heads bowed in humble and contrite confession, and their hands held out in faith of the gift of the redeeming love of Christ leaves a memory that can never be forgotten.

There are those who do give their hearts to God in prison and these are a joy indeed to those who have ministered to them. These may find difficulty when they return to the ordinary world. The churches are strange

to them and they feel strangers and are afraid, if their past is known, they will be unwelcome. This may be untrue but it needs to be proved to be untrue by the members of the Church itself. Whenever possible introductions to the minister of the home church are made, and by the sympathy and understanding of that minister his way is made the easier and he is brought into the larger fellowship.

There are many others who have only begun to find their way back, but at least the desire has been implanted and once again by suitable introduction that desire may be maintained until its full fruition in achievement.

There are some who seem to fail utterly. They promised well, but the impact of the world, its temptations and its indifference are too much for them. Yet even so they are not all total failures for amongst them are some who have tried harder than many of those whose lives have been in easier places. Effort is never in vain, and it may well be that that which once seemed impossible does, in the end, succeed.

The chaplain does not see the end of his work. All too often the man he has ministered to goes before he has been able to do for him all that was in his heart. Most of those who may be called his successes he never sees again because they have not again fallen into the way of evil. But such apparently negative success is nevertheless real success. Once and again he has a letter, or perhaps months or even years after there is a chance encounter and then he hears that some word, or more often some little act of his, was the beginning of the great change, and that from that point there was no turning back.

The task of the prison evangelist is hard and sometimes disappointing, but it is rewarding and again and yet again he shares in Heaven's joy over one sinner that repenteth.

The Monthly Letter will not appear over the summer months. Following the meeting of the Department on Evangelism in the summer, either the Monthly Letter or other regular communication about evangelism from the Department will be resumed in the autumn.

